



Vanderbilt University, South Africa's University of Cape Town partner to increase number of black scientists from South Africa

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Nashville, Tenn. - Faculty from Vanderbilt University and South Africa's University of Cape Town (UCT) will meet March 4-7 in Cape Town to discuss how they can work together to recruit and train more black astronomers in South Africa.

Like African-Americans in the United States, black Africans are underrepresented in the physical sciences, particularly in astronomy and space science. The three-day meeting in Cape Town is the start of a larger partnership between the two universities.

Under the agreement Vanderbilt and UCT will be core partners in research and education initiatives benefiting students, faculty and staff at both universities. Both universities plan for this new partnership to extend beyond the typical student exchange programs to include opportunities for collaborative research and study across several academic disciplines.

Vanderbilt Chancellor Gordon Gee will also travel to Cape Town to meet with UCT Vice Chancellor and Principal Njabulo S Ndebele and other university leaders.

"The University of Cape Town is a great intellectual, cultural and scientific center for the entire African continent," said Chancellor Gordon Gee. "Vanderbilt's partnership with UCT will create enhanced opportunities for our respective students and faculty, as well as grow the global network of researchers in several important disciplines."

Vanderbilt currently has a program with historically black Fisk University in Nashville to increase the number of minority students pursuing doctoral degrees in the physical sciences. The program is on track to make Fisk and Vanderbilt the nation's leading producers of minority physics and astronomy PhDs in the United States. Astronomy and physics faculty involved in the Vanderbilt-Fisk partnership are traveling with Gee to South Africa to talk with UCT faculty about starting a similar program there.

"Our experience in building the joint Fisk-Vanderbilt program is that a commitment to diversity and a commitment to research excellence go hand in hand. We believe this experience gives us something tangible and valuable to share with our South African colleagues as they work to enhance opportunity for their own students, and we know that their own efforts and experiences will be of value to us as well," said Keivan Stassun, Vanderbilt assistant professor of physics and astronomy and co-director of the Fisk-Vanderbilt Masters-to-PhD Bridge program and the Fisk Astronomy and Space Science Training program.

"We hope the partnership with UCT will enhance international research training opportunities both for African-American and other minority students in the Fisk-Vanderbilt Masters-to-PhD Bridge program and for black African students in the South African National Astronomy and Space Science Programme," Stassun said.

The Vanderbilt International Office (VIO) played a central role in coordinating the partnership with UCT. VIO is an integral part of the university's international strategy, which includes offering a curriculum that embraces global perspectives, providing students with linguistic and cultural education to help them thrive in the global community and fostering international research and teaching opportunities for faculty.

Joel Harrington, Vanderbilt assistant provost for international affairs who heads the international office, will travel with Gee to Cape Town. Edward Saff, executive dean of Vanderbilt's College of Arts and Science, will also make the trip.



Harrington said Vanderbilt's goal is to establish partnerships with six peer institutions around the world by the end of 2007 and an additional three or four over the subsequent two years.

"We are taking the approach of establishing core partnerships with a few world class universities that provide exciting opportunities for research collaborations across all of our schools and disciplines. We want these to be deep, significant partnerships as opposed to the scattershot approach that often results from having hundreds of university partnerships without much depth," Harrington said.

Vanderbilt is an internationally recognized research university with undergraduate programs in the liberal arts and sciences, engineering, music, education and human development, as well as a full range of graduate and professional degrees. Its medical center has built a strong reputation as a leader in medical education, research and patient care throughout the nation over the course of its 127-year history. An independent, privately supported university, Vanderbilt is the largest private employer in Middle Tennessee and the second largest private employer based in the state.

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